

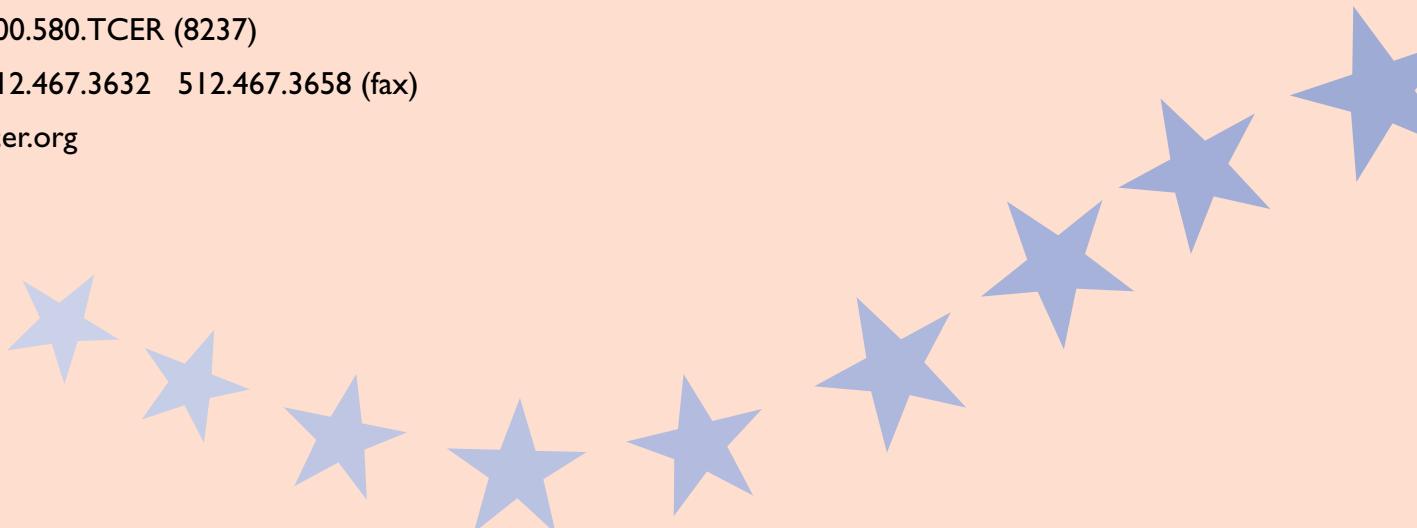
Students Training for Academic Readiness (STAR)



**Year Two
Evaluation
Report**

December 2008

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Year Two Evaluation Report Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, project strives to equalize low-income students' access to higher education by increasing their participation in rigorous coursework, providing expanded opportunities for low-income students and parents to learn about postsecondary educational opportunities and financing options, and forging strong partnerships between school districts, colleges, and community support groups. Created as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, GEAR UP began in 1998 as a system of federally funded grants targeted to schools in which at least 50% of students are designated as low income by their eligibility for free- or reduced-price lunches. GEAR UP grants extend across six school years and require that districts begin providing services to students no later than the seventh grade and that service continue until students graduate from high school. GEAR UP operates on an add-a-cohort model, in which the grade levels served by the grant expand as students matriculate. In the grant's initial year, services are focused on the seventh grade cohort, and as this cohort progresses, the grant expands to include each subsequent grade level until the initial cohort completes the twelfth grade.

The United States Department of Education (USDE) provides for two types of GEAR UP grants: (1) partnerships grants made up of school districts, colleges or universities, and other organizations, and (2) state grants administered by state agencies, either alone or in partnership with other entities. In 2006, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) applied for and received a state grant to administer a GEAR UP project in six Gulf Coast area school districts. The state grant, titled Students Training for Academic Readiness, or STAR, is implemented in six school districts in south Texas: Alice ISD, Brooks County ISD, Corpus Christi ISD, Kingsville ISD, Mathis ISD, and Odem-Edroy ISD. Each STAR district includes a high school and its associated feeder pattern middle school in the project

In addressing GEAR UP grant objectives, the STAR project seeks to:

1. Increase information provided to students and their families regarding postsecondary activities (Information Access and Early Intervention);
2. Increase student access to advanced academic programs (Advanced Academics);
3. Increase training for teachers and counselors regarding the assessment of student abilities and the means for assisting students in postsecondary choices (Educator Preparation); and
4. Increase parent involvement and community and family support in a student's decision to go to college (Family and Community Participation and Support).

In conjunction with these purposes, STAR identifies eight specific project goals for participating districts:

1. Increase the number of underrepresented (low-income and minority students) who are prepared to go to college.
2. Increase the number of limited English proficient (LEP) Hispanic students who successfully graduate and go to college.
3. Strengthen academic programs and student services at participating schools.
4. Build an academic pipeline from school to college.
5. Develop effective and enduring alliances among schools, colleges, students, parents, government, and community groups
6. Improve teaching and learning.

7. Provide students with intensive, individualized support.
8. Raise standards of academic achievement for all students.

Each goal contains a set of specific objectives that outline clear criteria for the achievement of each goal across project years. The complete set of STAR goals and their associated objectives are included in Appendix F of this report. In addition, Appendix F contains evaluation results that reflect STAR districts' progress toward achieving project goals and objectives.

STAR addresses its goals through a collaborative partnership that includes TEA, College Board the College of Education at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, Fathers Active in Communities and Education (FACE), and the National Hispanic Institute (NHI). GEAR UP grant requirements include an evaluation component designed to assess effectiveness and measure progress toward project goals. TEA contracted the Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER), a nonprofit research entity, to conduct an external evaluation of the state's GEAR UP/STAR project. TCER's evaluation is limited to the GEAR UP state grant (i.e., STAR) and does not include GEAR UP partnership grants awarded to other entities in Texas.¹ The findings presented in this report make up the second year evaluation of the state's GEAR UP/STAR project.

DATA SOURCES

The evaluation employs a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyses. Data sources include interviews with district and campus-level administrators, core subject area teachers, counselors, and STAR coordinators; surveys of students, parents, teachers, librarians, and counselors; observations in STAR classrooms; and demographic and performance data collected through the Texas Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) and the Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS).

MAJOR FINDINGS

Characteristics of STAR Districts and Campuses

On average, STAR districts lagged the state in terms of financial characteristics in 2006-07. Average district wealth per student in STAR districts was \$247,150 compared with \$360,926 for the state. STAR districts also spent an average of \$778 less per student on instruction than schools across the state (\$4,600 in STAR districts versus \$5,378 for the state, on average).

STAR schools enrolled substantially larger proportions of Hispanic and low-income students than state averages in 2006-07. Hispanic students comprised 86% of STAR districts' enrollments compared with a 46% statewide enrollment, and 70% of STAR students was characterized as low income compared with 56% of students statewide.

In terms of their educational programs, STAR campuses enrolled proportionately more students in special education (16% versus 11%) and career and technology education (43% versus 21%) than Texas schools in 2006-07. Despite their concentration of Hispanic students, STAR schools enrolled notably lower proportions of limited English proficient (LEP) students (3% versus 16%) and proportionately fewer students in bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) programs than schools across the state (3% versus 15%).

¹ In 2007-08, 19 GEAR UP partnership grants, or "Statewide Initiatives," operated in Texas.

Instruction in STAR Classrooms

In spring of 2008, evaluators conducted observations in 82 core content area STAR classrooms (39 middle school and 43 high school classrooms). Observations were evenly distributed across English/language arts (ELA), math, science, and social studies classes, with the largest proportion of observations taking place in science (29%) and ELA (27%). Classroom observations generally lasted 55 minutes and evaluators recorded information about classroom arrangement and organization, teacher and student roles during the lesson, as well as information about student engagement, opportunities for higher order thinking, and subject-specific indicators of rigorous course content and instruction.

The largest proportion of class time in both STAR middle and high school classrooms was spent in whole class activities. Students spent notably smaller percentages of class time working alone or in small groups. Relative to high school students, middle school students spent a smaller percentage of class time working alone and a larger percentage of time in activities that combined aspects of whole group, small group, and individual student work.

Across both middle school and high school classrooms, students demonstrated moderate engagement in instructional activities for the largest proportion of class time. Moderately engaged students participated in class activities and listened to teachers' instructions, but exhibited little enthusiasm or interest in their assigned tasks.

Indicators of higher order thinking were present to a very small or small extent in both middle school and high school classrooms. Indicators of higher order thinking include questioning strategies that require students to explain their reasoning, justify ideas, explain concepts, and relate class content to other contexts or their own lives.

Across all core content subject areas and each level of schooling, subject specific indicators of rigorous course content were present to a very small or small extent in observed STAR classrooms. Subject-specific indicators of course content were adapted from AP course documents for each subject area and measure the degree to which instruction in specific content areas is rigorous and provides opportunities for meaningful student engagement in course content.

Informational Resources and Family and Community Participation and Support

Counselors continue to be critical in coordinating informational resources and services that provide parents and students with college planning information. Middle school counselors spent a larger percentage of their time coordinating GEAR UP implementation, while high school counselors spent a greater percentage of their time assisting with tasks that promote the goals of GEAR UP (i.e., career counseling, assisting with course selection, and assisting with postsecondary admissions).

In the project's second year, teachers said they continued to promote college awareness through classroom activities focused on college readiness. Teachers said they delivered rigorous instruction designed to prepare students for the challenges of postsecondary education and planned lessons that required students to research the educational prerequisites for their preferred careers.

Middle school and high school students' responses to surveys indicate that a majority of STAR activities are implemented intermittently or as a supplement to the regular curriculum, as students either never participate in activities, or do so infrequently. High school students are more likely to participate in school activities, but do so at a lower frequency than middle school students.

STAR students and parents continued to have high educational aspirations in 2007-08. A majority of middle school and high school students expect to receive a bachelor's degree or higher, and most surveyed parents expected that their child would obtain a bachelor's degree.

Most STAR students were either familiar with four-year colleges and community colleges, but fewer were aware of vocational or technical postsecondary educational options. This result is surprising given the large proportion of STAR students enrolled in career and technical education (68% of high school students and 18% of middle school students).

STAR middle school and high school students were most likely to get information about college planning from a parent or guardian; however, parents indicated that they did not communicate with school personnel about college preparation and admissions. Less than half of parents of high school students knew the graduation plan in which their child was enrolled.

Districts experienced greater participation from partner organizations, such as FACE, NHI and P²S², in 2007-08. However, districts struggled to maintain parent attendance at partner events and expressed a need for better communication with parents and community members.

Advanced Academics and Educator Preparation

STAR students spend little time on nightly homework. In 2007-08, more than half of middle school students (51%) and slightly less than half of high school students (46%) reported spending 30 minutes or less on homework. Only 9% of middle school students and 15% of high school students reported spending an hour or more on homework.

Districts faced challenges in implementing AP programs in 2007-08. School administrators said that parents voiced concern about lower student grades in AP courses, and some administrators worried that the AP curriculum was being watered down to accommodate students who were not academically prepared for course content. In addition, many students choose less rigorous dual credit courses over AP coursework.

Districts continue to face challenges in enabling teachers to participate in vertical team training. Teachers and administrators said that it was difficult to coordinate training, noting the challenges in terms of securing substitutes and concerns over lost instructional time.

Within districts and campuses, vertical teams met infrequently in 2007-08. Time and scheduling constraints were the most common reason for the lack of meetings. However, when schools implemented vertical teams, administrators and teachers noticed positive changes, including increased rigor in classroom instruction.

The Faculty Fellows program expanded to include more teachers during STAR's second year. Proportionately more middle school than high school teachers participated in the program (19% versus 3%, respectively). Teachers said they generally communicated with their Faculty Fellows mentor about once a month and most teachers found mentor activities useful.

Year One (2006-07) Performance Indicators

The results presented in this section are drawn from PEIMS and AEIS data for the 2006-07 school year (the most current data available). Results are compared to baseline data collected for the 2005-06 school year—one year prior to the implementation of STAR.

TAKS passing rates have improved in most subject areas, although scores still lag behind state passing rates. Compared with 2006, STAR 2007 TAKS passing rates were higher in all tested areas except science. In addition, STAR 2007 TAKS passing rate gains exceeded state average in all content areas except science.

Commended TAKS performance rates improved in most subject areas, although scores still lag behind state commendable performance rates. Compared with 2006, STAR 2007 TAKS commended performance rates were higher in all tested areas except writing and all tests taken. In 2007, STAR TAKS commended performance rates still trailed state average commended performance rates in all tested areas.

The percentages of high school students receiving credit for at least one AP course were similar in 2006 and 2007. In 2006, 12.5% of STAR high school students received credit for at least one AP course. That percentage increased slightly to 13.7% in 2007. In both 2006 and 2007, the largest numbers of students received credit in AP English Language and Composition, AP English Literature and Composition, AP U.S. History, and AP World History.

STAR high schools experienced a slight decrease in their graduation rates. The 2007 graduation rate for STAR high schools (73%) was about four percentage points lower than the 2006 graduation rate (77%), and it was lower than the 2007 state (78%) and peer campus (78%) averages.

STAR campuses experienced a slight increase in the number of students taking more rigorous coursework. Compared to the baseline year of 2005-06, there was a one point increase in the percentage of STAR students who completed the more rigorous Recommended High School Program/Distinguished Achievement Program (RHSP/DAP) in 2006-07 (80% in 2005-06 and 81% in 2006-07). In addition, compared to the state average, a higher percentage of STAR students completed the RHSP/DAP in 2006-07 (81% compared with 78%). However, a lower percentage of STAR students completed the RHSP/DAP compared to the peer campus average (81% compared with 86%).

Advanced course completion rates increased slightly in 2006-07. Compared with 2005-06, STAR 2006-07 advanced course completion rates were slightly higher (16% versus 15%). STAR high school students had lower 2006-07 advanced course completion rates than peer campuses and the state overall (16% versus 18% for peer campuses and 22% for the state).

The 2006-07 percentage of STAR students taking college entrance examinations was higher than peer campus and state averages (75% for STAR campuses, 69% for peer campuses and 68% for the state). The percentage scoring at or above the criterion was similar to the peer campuses but much lower than the state average (8% for STAR and peer campuses and 27% for the state).

The percentage of STAR high school graduates who were college ready in both reading and mathematics increased slightly in 2006-07 (by one percentage point). The percentage of 2006-07 STAR high school graduates who were college-ready in both reading and mathematics was lower than the state average but higher than peer campus average (25% of STAR graduates were college ready compared to 37% across the state and 22% at peer campuses).

STAR districts experienced an increase in graduates pursuing postsecondary education opportunities. Compared with 2006, there were percentage increases in STAR graduates entering a four year university (a less than one percentage point increase), a community college or technical school (a three percentage point increase), and entering higher education (a three percentage point increase) in 2007.